

Statement of Richard Schifter, former U.S. Representative in the UN Human Rights Commission and former Deputy U.S. Representative in the UN Security Council, before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the House International Relations Committee, on April 20, 2005.

“A Dangerous Place” is what the late Senator Moynihan called the United Nations in his memoir about his experience as U.S. Permanent Representative in the 1970’s. I came away with the same impression during my service there in the 1980’s and in the early 1990’s. I concluded then that I had not theretofore encountered any organization so deeply scarred by intellectual dishonesty, cynicism and make-believe as the General Assembly of the United Nations and some of its offshoots, such as the Economic and Social Council and the UN Human Rights Commission. The condition has not changed since then. On the contrary, it has now turned out that the dishonesty at the UN is not only intellectual but financial as well.

There is a good deal of discussion right now, including suggestions made by the Secretary General, of steps to be taken to reform the UN. That is all for the good. But it is important that reform not be limited to rearranging the deck chairs, but to correcting the system’s serious flaws.

These flaws do not encompass the entire UN system. Organizations such as UNICEF, the UN Development Program, the World Health Organization, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, and other mission-oriented organizations play highly worthwhile roles. So, in fact, does the UN Security Council. As I have already noted, it is the UN General Assembly and its offshoots that give the UN its bad reputation.

I was an American soldier in Germany when the San Francisco Conference that established the United Nations took place. The war in Europe came to an end while the Conference was still in session. Those of us who followed the events in San Francisco as the European end of World War II came to an end hoped indeed that the newly-formed organization would advance the causes of international peace and security, friendly relations among nations, and international co-operation, as spelled out in the Charter. For some years, the UN did indeed play that role effectively.

I believe that the turn-around came in the 1960’s when the Soviet Union saw an opportunity to use the UN General Assembly as a platform on which it could embarrass the United States. It accomplished that result by co-opting the Non-Aligned Movement. The NAM had been created in the Fifties as an organization that was neither in the Soviet nor the Western camp. But with the death of Nehru in 1964 the role of the NAM in what during my UN years we called “the real world” declined sharply. But it was kept alive at the UN under new leadership, the leadership of Fidel Castro. It was under that leadership that the NAM apparatus at the UN became a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Soviet bloc.

During my stay at the UN in New York I once had lunch with an ambassador of a NAM member country. In the course of our conversation, he asked me whether I knew how the Non-Aligned Movement really works. I told him that I did not. He then said: “As you

know, we used to be on the other side.” He meant by that that his country had been on the Soviet side. He went on to tell me that on the day before every plenary meeting of the NAM delegations to the UN, about 17 or 18 member states that were close friends of the Soviet Union would meet in a closed, confidential session. At that session, assignments were given out for the next day. One delegation was told what resolution it should introduce. Another delegation was told to speak in support of the resolution. Then the organizers went on to the next resolution and the assignments for it. Thus the entire session for the next day was choreographed. On the following day, each of the delegations performed as instructed and, as the ambassador put it to me, “there sat the silent majority and simply went along.”

I also heard in that context about the key role the Castro Cuban operatives played at the planning sessions. By that time I had become fully aware of the role of the Castro’s minions at the UN. The Soviets were too ham-handed to do an effective job of organizing for a vote. But the Cubans were masters of the art. Their Mission did not make changes in personnel every few years, as we did. They stayed around for a long time, acquired a thorough knowledge of the process and developed close relations with key personnel from other delegations. Moreover, as another diplomat from a NAM state told me, they frightened those who tried to deviate from the line by calling them “running dogs of imperialism.”

One would have thought that with the end of the Cold War, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a drastic change would occur at the UN. This has not happened. The attitudes that had been fostered, the personal arrangements that had been made over a quarter century remained in place. Many Permanent Representatives at the UN do not even try to figure out how the UN could serve the national interests of their respective countries. Instead they play the UN game, behaving in a manner that gets them elected to committee chairmanships or causes other honors and benefits to be bestowed on them. That is the setting in which Castro’s agents continue to perform their chosen role: that of embarrassing the United States.

It is against this background that the problem of Israel’s treatment at the UN can be more readily understood. It started with the “Zionism is Racism” resolution, which some believe originated with the KGB in Moscow. The initial sponsors and supporters were not deeply identified with the Palestinian cause. But in that cause the Soviets saw an issue on which they could pick up the Arab and other Muslim states. By aligning them with the Soviet bloc and then manipulating the Non-Aligned Movement, they could engage in their anti-US campaign.

Israel then became an obsession of the UN General Assembly and its offshoots. Spending many hours on anti-Israel harangues, passing resolutions against Israel, and allocating resources to anti-Israel activity, the UN General Assembly has ignored the real problems which it should address if it were to discharge the role carved out for it in the UN Charter. During the last three years hundreds of thousands of residents of Darfur have been killed and millions have been rendered homeless. The UN has talked about the problem but when it had a chance to take action on a resolution on the subject, a majority

voted for a “no-action” motion, the UN equivalent of a motion to table. Numerous other problems that threaten international peace and security and that would deserve the attention of the UN General Assembly are similarly ignored.

By contrast, the UN General Assembly has for years shown its obsession with Israel by going through an annual ritual of adopting numerous resolutions directed against Israel, resolutions on almost all of which the United States votes “no.” At the current session, the UN General Assembly has so far adopted twenty-three so-called “country-specific” resolutions. One such resolution criticizes the United States for the Cuban embargo, one resolution criticizes Iran for its human rights record, one resolution criticizes Turkmenistan on the same ground, one resolution dealing with human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is directed against Rwanda and Uganda, and nineteen resolutions deal with Israel. The United States voted “no” on seventeen of them and abstained on the remaining two resolutions.

There are three resolutions among the seventeen that deserve special attention. As distinct from the others, which are essentially declaratory, three resolutions have an operational effect: they re-authorize from year to year the expenditure of funds and resources on the operation of a worldwide, UN-funded propaganda campaign against Israel. They have brought about the embedding in the UN bureaucracy of a staff whose sole full-time, year-round job it is to agitate against Israel. Given their operational effect, to serve as the core of the UN’s anti-Israel campaign, these resolutions were quite appropriately listed among the ten UN votes that the United States deemed most important and they appear as such in Part IV of the State Department’s annual report.

The oldest of the three resolutions is the one that set up the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories. It was adopted in 1968. Apparently assuming that this effort required enhancement, the General Assembly added in 1975 the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. To make sure that that Committee would have full staff support, a Special Unit on Palestinian Rights was created, to serve as the Committee’s secretariat. In 1981 the General Assembly called upon the Secretary General to reconstitute the Special Unit as a Division for Palestinian Rights.

The UN’s in-house anti-Israel propaganda apparatus has thus functioned for the last thirty-seven years. The unique character of the committees is underlined by the UN web site. If one proceeds to the listing of the General Assembly, one will find that only three committees seemed to qualify for special mention. In second and third place are two housekeeping committees, the Committee on Information and the Committee on Programme and Coordination. But in first place on the web site under “General Assembly” is the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

An examination of the chart of organization of the UN’s Department of Political Affairs, attached hereto, further underlines the unique treatment accorded the Palestinian issue.

The chart shows that there are six divisions in the Department. One of them, the Division on Security Council Affairs, has a worldwide mandate. Four of them have regional mandates, one division for the Americas and Europe, one for Asia and the Pacific, and two for Africa. And then there is the sixth division, dealing under the best of circumstances with only a small sliver of the world's problems, the Division for Palestinian Rights. As it is, the Division does not exist for a positive, constructive purpose, but merely to coordinate, from within the office of the Secretary General of the United Nations, a propaganda campaign against Israel. A while ago I showed the chart to a member of the U.S. Senate. He looked at it and then exclaimed: "This is ridiculous." On another occasion I showed the chart to the Foreign Minister of a country with which the United States has good relations. After he had seen the chart, he told me that he had been foreign minister for a number of years, had personally reviewed his country's UN voting record, but was completely unaware of the arrangement created by the relevant General Assembly resolution. He turned to a member of his staff and asked: "Where is the Division on Burmese Rights?"

At the current session of the UN General Assembly, the foregoing three resolutions were adopted by "yes" votes that ranged from 84 to 104, the "no" votes ranged from 7 to 9, but there was a large number of abstentions, ranging from 63 to 80. An abstention at the UN plays the same role as does voting "Present" in the House of Representatives. It means the member state in question is not in favor of the resolution but is not prepared to go so far as to vote "no." The European Union and, with it, almost all the European countries abstain on the three resolutions. All three resolutions raise budgetary questions. Budgetary questions are under the Charter important questions and important questions require a two-thirds vote. This means that if the Europeans were to move from abstention to "no," the resolutions would not have the required two-thirds. Is it likely that they would move? The possibility exists, particularly if high-ranking officials, like the foreign minister that I mentioned, were made fully aware of what it is that these three entities that fly the UN flag and are funded by the UN are really doing. The American Jewish International Relations Institute is now at work to put together a report on that subject.

The result of these annual votes by the UN General Assembly can be summarized as follows. First, they tend to undermine the effort of the United States Government to bring peace to the region. Second, they are an albatross around the neck of the UN Secretary General when he, as a member of the so-called Quartet, wants to help advance the peace process. Third, they provide aid and comfort to the hardliners in the Palestinian camp, who wish to undermine the peace process.

Under a law enacted about twenty years ago, the State Department is called upon to furnish Congress with an annual report that compares the votes cast by the other 190 member states with the votes cast by the United States. Last year Congress amended the law by asking for a special break-out of the votes dealing with Israel. The most recent report, which was completed a few days ago, contains such a break-out

If the State Department report on this pattern of UN voting is given full distribution is there a chance of a change in the Israel-related votes? I believe there is. Many of the

member states that vote against the position of the United States are desirous of friendly relations with the United States. In many situations the governmental leadership is not aware of what happens in New York. Thus, a few years ago, I met with the President of a country to discuss the UN votes. He looked at his papers and told me that he did not see why there should be concern about his country's votes. As our discussion progressed, it turned out that his Foreign Ministry had supplied him with information of the voting record of quite a number of years earlier. When he was shown the current voting record, he was shocked and said he would see to it that the votes would change. They did.

There are also cases in which high-ranking officials have not fully realized how the actions of the UN General Assembly damage the peace process. Many are also not fully aware that the annual anti-Israel exercise is the outcropping of the anti-US sentiment that has been fostered at the UN for decades. If the case were made to friendly governments clearly and at high levels, there is a chance that a significant number of member states would switch their votes.

Does this suggest a failing by the US Mission to the UN and our Ambassador to the UN? Most definitely not. Permanent Representatives to the UN fall into essentially two classes, those who vote on instructions from the capital and those who are uninstructed. As to those who are fully instructed, it is clear that the case has to be made by our Embassies in the relevant capitals. As to those who are uninstructed, we need to be concerned that -- given the anti-US and anti-Israel climate in New York, and given also the promises and threats that might emanate from the other side -- the chances of getting an uninstructed Permanent Representative to change his votes by offering persuasive arguments are very, very slim. In these cases, too, it is necessary to make representations in capitals at high enough levels to be taken seriously and urge that instructions be issued to the New York missions on matters of concern to the United States.

I need to say that I learned this lesson the hard way. At the UN Human Rights Commission I had experience with colleagues who promised me their vote and then voted the other way. Afterwards they apologized and told me they had made a mistake. Then, in a dialogue we had with the Cuban representative, we were accused of bribing members of the Commission. It got me to wonder whether, as psychologists would say, this was a case of projecting.

What I learned at the Commission with regard to voting was to collect as much information during the day through conversations with colleagues and then, in the evening, go back to my office and write messages, at the State Department we called them "cables," asking the appropriate Embassy to make the needed representations to the governments to which they were accredited. That approach did not work all the time but it worked often.

To be sure, so-called demarches in capitals are made regularly. Before every session of the General Assembly or the Human Rights Commission, a message will be sent out asking Embassies to present the US case to the relevant foreign ministries. Often, a junior Embassy official will present our case on a long list of resolutions to a mid-level

official in the foreign ministry and the matter would end there. The President of a country friendly to the United States has been quoted to me as having said that if the US sends in a Second Secretary, it means that for the US the matter is a secondary issue.

The issue is, therefore, whether the US ambassadors will take the time to familiarize themselves with the issues posed by the aforementioned resolutions and will be prepared to present them at a sufficiently high level, at least to the foreign minister, perhaps also to a prime minister or president. Many ambassadors are quite understandably preoccupied with bilateral issues and consider the UN in New York as a side show in which they prefer not to get involved. What this means is that, to effect significant change at the UN, a decision will have to be made at a high level in the State Department to the effect that UN performance is sufficiently important to the US National interest for our ambassadors to be instructed to place the UN on their agenda and advance the appropriate arguments for changes in positions at an appropriately high level.

There is one other point that should be added. A number of foreign ambassadors in Washington have told me how much more complicated their job is here than it would be in other capitals. The point they made was that in most countries, the ambassador will talk to the foreign minister of the country to which he is accredited and that would be it. In the United States it is often necessary to stay in touch not only with the State Department but with relevant personnel of the National Security Council and, if one has matters of interest that will come before the Congress, with members of Congress. The other side of this coin is that bilateral ambassadors in Washington will communicate the concerns of members of Congress to their governments and the governments will take these concerns into account in formulating policies, particularly policies that do not directly involve their national interests.

There are those who will say that there is no chance to attain the result that I have here suggested, that of putting the UN anti-Israel propaganda apparatus out of business. I have heard such statements in similar situations in the past. I submit that it may be difficult to attain the result we seek, but not impossible.

Department of Political Affairs Organizational Chart

